

Russian president defends authoritarian rule in the name of “democracy”

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At the World Political Forum in Iaroslavl, Russia on September 10, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev outlined his views on the meaning of democracy. When taken together with his other declarations about “modernizing” the country, his latest statement underscores the right-wing and anti-democratic character of his policies, which are profoundly hostile to the working class. Medvedev’s definition of democracy is entirely in keeping with the overall rightward shift in official European politics.

Insisting that the political system that presently exists in Russia is democratic and well suited to the country, and that nothing “needs to be radically changed,” the Russian president outlined “five signs of democracy.”

These included “the legal incarnation of humanistic values and ideals,” “the ability of the state to guarantee and support a high rate of technological development, which secures a worthy standard of living for its citizens,” “the ability of the state to defend its citizens from the dangers of criminal associations,” “a high level of culture, education, means of communication and exchange of information,” and, finally, the conviction on the part of citizens “that they are living in a democratic state.”

Declaring “representative democracy” to be unacceptable for Russia, Medvedev excluded freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to vote, freedom of the press, the separation of church and state and the other rights associated with bourgeois democracy from his five principles.

Medvedev counseled Russians to use the Internet as a means of influencing government authorities in a manner reminiscent of the way the Stalinist regime in the USSR insisted that Soviet workers could express their wishes and give “mandates” to the ruling

bureaucracy by writing letters.

Tacitly endorsing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s recent statement that anyone participating in public demonstrations in violation of Russia’s extremely restrictive assembly laws would get a “club to the head,” Medvedev insisted that at present “[f]reedom of speech, assembly and meetings is realized in practice within clearly established legal boundaries, and that is how it should be in the future.”

In his remarks, Medvedev cited Karl Popper and Seymour Lipset—ideologues of imperialism who became icons of the neo-conservative movement that has dominated official American politics for decades.

The speech given by Medvedev, who is frequently portrayed in the Russian liberal and Western media as a more democratically inclined alternative to Putin, underscores the reactionary character of Russian capitalism. It once again reveals the hollowness of the claims made in the 1980s and 1990s that the restoration of a market economy in the former Soviet Union would usher in a new period of freedom and democracy.

Presiding over a country with staggering levels of inequality, Medvedev, like Putin, is deeply opposed to all political institutions that could in any way be used by the working people to express their class interests or mount an opposition to the government and the country’s super-rich oligarchy.

Even by Medvedev’s own stated standards—humanism, high living standards, physical security, a well-educated population with access to modern technology, a popular belief that the society is democratic—Russia fails to meet the definition of democracy.

In Russia, any sign of opposition to the official Kremlin line is likely to be met with police batons. Rural villages recently burned to the ground during an

outbreak of wildfires for lack of basic firefighting equipment. Dozens of people die every week in the Caucasus in a civil war fueled by the government's brutal efforts to regain control over the region. Earlier this year, the Duma (parliament) proposed a law that, if passed, would have effectively liquidated free public education. Every Russian knows that all of the country's television channels are controlled and censored by the government.

Medvedev's speech was primarily aimed at making clear his support for the authoritarian forms of rule that have developed alongside the restoration of capitalism in the post-Soviet era. In doing so, he was speaking to both domestic and international audiences.

Medvedev's comments were directed at enlisting the support of influential layers of the Russian ruling elite on the eve of a new election cycle and presidential elections in 2012, assuring them that regardless of his media reputation as civic-minded alter ego to Putin, he can be relied upon to defend the existing political order and defend the ill-gotten wealth of the ruling elite.

The Russian president's comments were also intended for the ears of international investors, whom he is courting as part of his new economic policy.

For the last year, Medvedev has been promoting the "modernization" of Russia. Lamenting the country's "economic backwardness" and excessive reliance on raw materials, the president has campaigned for the diversification of the country's economy through a combination of state assistance and international investment. This has been coupled with calls for fiscal austerity in other spheres, in particular, social services and pensions.

The class content of Medvedev's "modernization" campaign is encapsulated in the proposal to create an "innovation city" in Skolkovo, on the outskirts of Moscow. This project envisions the investment of not less than 60 billion rubles (approximately \$1.93 billion) in public money in order to create modern research and development facilities, which will then be handed over to leading private corporations free of charge.

These enterprises will operate under the protection of a separate customs, tax and inspections regime, largely free of state oversight or tax obligations. On September 18, the government passed a variety of additional legal provisions aimed at increasing Skolkovo's attractiveness to foreign investors.

As Arkady Dvorkovich, an aide to President Medvedev, boasted, "In Skolkovo we will build the best golf courses, the best clubs and restaurants."

In contrast, in a sign of what "modernization" means for Russia's working class, Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin on Monday announced the elimination of 100,000 civil service jobs over the next three years. Prior to this, Kudrin proposed raising Russia's retirement age to a level that exceeds average male life expectancy.

Both the Kremlin and Russia's ruling elite know that despite efforts to paint "modernization" as something progressive that will benefit the entire population, the consequences of this new economic policy for working people will provoke opposition. Over the last two years in particular, Russia has been rocked by a number of violent protests over miserable social and economic conditions.

In 2009, impoverished residents of the industrial town Pikalevo blocked a federal highway in a protest against job losses and wage arrears, while in May of this year miners angered at the state's response to a lethal accident at a coal operation battled the police in anti-government demonstrations.

Medvedev's speech in Iaroslavl was intended to assuage any concerns within the Russian ruling elite or international capital that his "modernization" campaign might include a loosening of the Kremlin's grip on political life in the country. The Russian president used the occasion to reaffirm his commitment to the suppression of popular opposition to his policies.



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